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From nomadism to social collectivism: Searching for the roots of civil society in rural Kazakhstan

Bankoff, Greg; Oven, Katie

University of Hull
Cottingham Road , Hull HU6 7RX
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Abstract

This article explores the environmental, historical and cultural factors that influence civic engagement among rural communities in contemporary Kazakhstan. It traces how forms of nomadic communitarianism as a response to the vicissitudes of life on the open Steppe merged with the imposed collectivism of Soviet society in such a manner that the two were able to coexist together in both policy and practice. Drawing on fieldwork among a number of villages in South Kazakhstan, we argue that, together, the nomadic and Soviet pasts still constitute the core values at work in rural communities, influencing the structure of local power relations and the nature of group association and cooperative venture. Rather than disappearing, these values, if anything, are re-emerging as part of an attempt to legitimise Kazakh culture as the core identity of the modern nation state.

Keywords

Kazakhstan, civil society, nomadism, collectivism, rural studies

“In my opinion, in Soviet times life was better” one informant declared by way of concluding a focus group discussion in a village in South Kazakhstan (FGD with Village Elders, Tonkeris, 7 July 2016). This is a commonly held sentiment expressed by persons of a certain age, the over fifties, in rural Kazakhstan. While acknowledging many of the advantages of the present, elder people often nostalgically mourn the loss of traditional values and the sense of egalitarianism that are seen to characterise former times. “For me the Soviet Union was better than now. For some other people, for example rich farmers, this period is better” another elder at the same meeting agreed (FGD with Village Elders, Tonkeris, 7 July 2016). For life to be sustainable in rural Kazakhstan, people have always had to depend on one another; the expectation being that assistance freely given will be reciprocated in times of need, for example, in the event of a disaster such as a flood or earthquake. It is this that defines the community; reciprocity more than geography forms the basis of group solidarity in rural Kazakhstan by determining to whom one owes an obligation of care and from whom one can expect assistance in times of travail.

On the Central Asian Steppe, where, until the 1930s, mobility was the most practical strategy for exploiting scarce resources and dealing with adversity, nomadism dictated the social, economic and political structures of the community. The state, when it existed, was a distant entity and reliance on the group, perforce, was the mainstay of survival. The self-supporting community remained paramount: it successfully resisted attempted co-optation by czarist

administrators and outright suppression by Soviet authorities. Even after sedentarization, the underlying structures of group solidarity, as manifest in mutual assistance and expressed by *adat* or customary law, survived largely intact. In the village, group adherence as measured in terms of a community's ability to act for its own collective benefit persists into the present, though the bonds that bind people together are now pitted against the relentless forces of commercialisation, outmigration, and state penetration. The questioning of traditional values is particularly evident among the young, a fact repeatedly commented upon by elder people, though social capital or the networks of trust, mutual assistance and conflict resolution that enable communities to coordinate and implement their social and economic endeavours, remains a marked feature of rural life in contemporary Kazakhstan (Coleman 1988).

Any discussion of social capital necessarily invokes the concept of civil society and its precise nature (Fukuyama 2001). What constitutes civil society and when it forms are questions of pressing ideological as well as practical consideration in contemporary Central Asia. Here, civil society is regarded as historically “weak”, with people lacking the “civic skills” deemed essential for consolidating and maintaining a democratic system (Howard 2002). It is likewise claimed that there is no history of volunteerism in these societies and that what degree of civic engagement exists today is a relatively new phenomenon postdating independence (Amagoh and Kabdiyeva 2012, 32; Kabdiyeva 2015, 165). The reason for these largely “inactive communities” is blamed firmly on the Soviet past and the kollektiv mentality of the Communist era that mistrusted individualism and stifled personal responsibility (Ziegler 2010, 808). Some scholars have gone so far as to question whether there was any public space for civil society in the Soviet Union (Howell and Pearce 2001). Instead, they argue that civil society had to be built from scratch after independence when a largely urban citizenry began to engage in voluntary associations and actively promoted democratic values, while market liberalisation delivered much needed social services (Ruffin and Waugh 1999; Sajoo 2002; Zeigler 2015).

Needless to say, such neo-liberal models do not sufficiently reflect either the historical or cultural heritage of people in post-socialist Central Asia and are based on Western standards that are not always “relevant to local tradition and culture” (Kabdiyeva 2015, 167). Too often, insufficient attention is given to the macro-social conditions, the complex interrelationships among social strata and social institutions that shape civil society (Salamon and Sokolowski 2017, 74). Instead, a more culturally sensitive approach needs to begin with religion as providing a common sense of belonging to an inclusive Islamic community or *umma*. This “religious civil society” with its non-voluntary membership transcends all social and ethnic barriers but confers disproportionate influence on certain individuals or groups, especially in rural areas (Mardin 1995). In making their case for the social origins of civil society, Lester Salamon and Wojciech Sokolowski talk about the continuing influence that such power relations exert among social classes even though the forces that initially produced them may no longer exist. What they refer to as “path dependence” results from the fact that once certain institutional arrangements are put in place, it is easier and less expensive to expand on them than to create entirely new ones from scratch (Salamon and Sokolowski 2017, 81-82).

In Kazakhstan, we argue that this path dependence needs to consider a deeper history than simply an Islamic past and acknowledge people's nomadic pastoral antecedents. Until 1970, Kazakh society was predominantly rural and, even today, more than 40 percent of the population live in villages (World Atlas 2017). At the local level, there is a long and vibrant tradition of self-help and mutual regard that both underlies the Islamic cultural heritage and predates Communist collectivism. Civic engagement is an essential component of a rural tradition that binds people together, both within and between communities, through a common cultural inheritance of shared values derived from a nomadic past in a harsh physical environment.

Drawing on ideas from social origins theory, this article explores the environmental, historical and cultural structures that underlie civil society in contemporary Kazakhstan, and the implications of these findings for present day disaster preparedness and risk reduction. Social origins theory is a particularly useful analytic here as it seeks to explain the differences in “nonprofit regimes” in different country contexts. It is able to do so through an understanding of their particular historical ‘moorings’, which reveal different social and economic ‘shapes,’ and the occupation of different institutional positions in society relative to those of the state and the market (Anheier 2010: 1445). Accordingly, we ask what factors have historically influenced forms of civil engagement, especially in rural areas, and to what extent do traditional power structures continue to shape the development of civil society today?

In doing so, we regard civil society as an inherently endogenous form of social capital, emerging from a particular set of cultural and environmental circumstances, rather than viewing it as a recent phenomenon, inspired by post-1991 social, economic and political developments and external funding.¹ We also argue that it is not just local-level power relations that continue to shape civil society today but historical patterns. To show how this process evolved over time, we trace how forms of nomadic communitarianism arose as a response to the vicissitudes of life on the open Steppe and then merged with the imposed collectivism of Soviet society in such a manner that the two were able to coexist in both policy and practice. We argue that, together, the nomadic and Soviet pasts still constitute the core values at work in rural communities, influencing the structure of local power relations and the nature of group association and cooperative venture (Dave 2007). Rather than disappearing, these values, if anything, are re-emerging as part of an attempt to legitimise Kazakh culture as the core identity of the modern nation state. Any attempt, therefore, to understand civil society in today's Kazakhstan must begin with an appreciation of the country's past and how adversity has shaped its peoples and social structures. We argue that such an examination challenges more dominant Western theorisations about the origins and nature of civil society in Central Asia and other post-socialist spaces in the region.

Civil society and adversity

What was the basis of social cohesion in the past? In the liberal tradition, civil society is assumed to have arisen to defend the public interest against power-holders and market interests. If not directly opposed to the state, civil society is seen as limiting or, at least, mediating the exercise of power and its worst abuses (Suleiman 2013, 245-246). This is a specific historical context that bears little relationship to the past experiences of many non-Western peoples. Instead, we argue that in some societies people are bound together through norms and networks that enable them to act collectively in times of need or adversity. Communities that have dense networks of such relationships are held to be rich in social capital and judged to have a high degree of resilience (Woolcock and Narayan 2000, 226). Social capital comes in various guises that denotes the type of relationship and the functions it serves: “bonding” ties between family, friends, neighbours and associates of similar demographic characteristics; “bridging” ties among people from different ethnic, locational and occupational backgrounds but of similar socio-economic status; and “linking” ties with those external to the community who occupy positions of wider societal influence (Woolcock 2001). Many of these ties overlap with real or fictive kinship relations both within and outside the community or with more or less institutionalised relationships based on instrumental exchanges in the daily provision of services and governance (Coleman 1988).

The concept of social capital like that of civil society is closely associated with the Western tradition, especially with the ideas and research of Robert Putnam. The more social capital a community “possesses”, so Putnam argues, the more its inhabitants are civically engaged and are actively concerned with pursuing the broader public good over those of the individual or family (Putnam 2000). Putnam is primarily interested in civic engagement as a precursor to effective participatory governance, and, therefore, as a brake on state power (Putnam et al 1993).² However, the degree to which a community’s members are active is also an effective measure of its ability to deal with adversity: “civic communities” are largely self-reliant, much better able to rebound from serious shocks, such as natural hazards, and are able to learn from their misfortunes (Bankoff 2012). They are more resilient. Daniel Aldrich describes a resilient community as one where the collective ability of a neighbourhood or geographically defined area is such that it can deal effectively with the stressors of everyday events and the shocks or crises without undue disruption to daily life. He argues that the strength and cohesion of a community prior to suffering a major knock is the best predictor for anticipating the degree and rate of its subsequent recovery (Aldridge 2012).

Putnam’s focus on the importance of associational groups to the development of democratic values in society was very influential in informing the initial civil society support programmes funded by USAID and the other large multi-lateral donors in the new post-socialist nations of Central Asia (Giffen 2005, 13). At least, during the first decade after independence, there was a preoccupation among external donors with fostering the development of non-government organisations to protect society from the authoritarian tendencies of successor governments and to facilitate society’s transition to a liberal, free market democracy (Howard 2002; Babajanian, et al 2005, 210). Given that the values on which such models of change are formulated were rooted in the historical specificity of the Cold War (Bankoff 2019), the subsequent policy and practice of international donors reflect a

distinctive cultural evolution that biases the urban over the rural and pays little attention to the nature of civic engagement in other cultural traditions (Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001; Stolle and Hooghe 2004). The extent to which such attitudes in practice govern projects in the field is more difficult to gauge and varies from country to country. As regards Kazakhstan, there is little evidence to date that much attention has been paid to the nature of civil society in rural areas and interest has focused almost exclusively on NGOs operating in the cities (Saktaganova and Ospanova 2013, 1280).³

Though a defined political entity since 1925, the present-day Republic of Kazakhstan was only established as an independent country with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.⁴ It is a sparsely inhabited, vast, landlocked country with a population of only 17.3 million spread over a territory of more than 2,700,000 km². Given this history and geography, most multilateral agencies and international donors regard civil society in Central Asia as a recent phenomenon, one that basically coincides with independence (ADB 2007; Knox and Janenova 2018, 309). The civil society that is defined in this literature refers to the voluntary groups and associations formed to protect people's rights and interests and that occupy the public space between state and household. The CIVICUS Civil Society Index, for example, defines civil society as "the arena, outside of the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations and institutions to advance shared interests" (CIVICUS 2011, 8). To Altinay Kuchukeeva and John O'Loughlin, civil society does not only occupy the sphere between state and the market but serves to promote "democratic values" and "active citizenship" (2003, 557-558). A liberal state and a market economy are both necessary prerequisites to any understanding of civil society. More interested in implementing their own agenda of promoting multi-party democracies and free-market economies, the international donor community pays scant attention to existing forms of civic engagement and how they operate. If these other forms of engagement are considered at all, they are mainly dismissed as archaic remnants of a former social system that will disappear over time under the right conditions of development.

As regards Kazakhstan, the commonly considered opinion held by most scholars and donors alike is similar to that voiced by Aliya Kabdiyeva and John Dixon who conclude that prior to 1991: "There was no history of volunteerism in the country" (Kabdiyeva and Dixon 2014, 34). This view is not only one commonly held by outsiders but also represents a decidedly urban preoccupation that largely precludes consideration of rural areas. In fact, the countryside is often decried for its lack of civic engagement and for the absence of group associations (ADB 2005, 2; Nezhina and Ibrayeva 2013, 343). What constitutes civil society is assumed to be principally an urban phenomenon, the domain of NGOs and the Third Sector (almost half the total number of NGOs are based in Almaty), the preserve of liberal democratic ideals, and fashioned according to the dictates of Western social scientists (Saktaganova and Opsnova 2012, 1281; Soltys 2014). The training on offer, too, on how to build civil society is largely based on Western standards that are not always "relevant to local tradition and culture" (Amagoh and Kabdiyeva 2012, 38). Unsurprisingly, this overtly western and urban bias clouds all subsequent discussion on the emergence of civil society and the activities of NGOs in Kazakhstan.

This official “history” usually begins with according recognition to the changes that took place in late-Soviet Kazakh society as a result of *perestroika* (Kabdiyeva 2015, 161; Knox and Yessimova 2015, 304).⁵ In particular, the 1986 law permitting the establishment of associations and interest-based clubs is credited with the formation of the first genuinely civic discussion groups and movements in support of reform. Among the few notable success stories celebrated at this time is the public campaign mounted by the antinuclear movement, Nevada-Semipalatinsk that led to the closure of the country’s nuclear testing site in 1990 (Kabdiyeva 2015, 161). Movements such as this are credited with opening-up the political scene and serving as the basis for the first political parties following independence in 1991 (ADB 2015, 2). These promising beginnings, however, are usually balanced by reference to the repressive countermeasures taken by the state. Significance, for instance, is given to the suppression of the student and worker protests against Moscow’s appointment of an ethnic Russian, Gennady Kolbin, as the new First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Kazakhstan Communist Party in 1986 to replace the long-standing native Kazakh, Dinmukhamed Kunayev (Kuzio 1988; Makhumotova and Akhmetova 2011, 18). The degree to which a functioning civil society and the total number of NGOs indicate progress towards a liberal democratic society and the nature of the relationship between the two tends to dominate the subsequent discussion. While these two questions are invariably related, external commentators, donors and international agencies are more preoccupied by the former, while national politicians, bureaucrats and academics are more concerned with the latter.

It is our contention, however, that this debate suffers from a double misapprehension. Firstly, it disregards the realities of historical demography, that until 1970 Kazakhstan was a predominantly rural not urban society, and that balance has only marginally changed in favour of the latter in recent decades (Andreev et al. 1993)⁶. What transpires in rural areas, therefore, is still of crucial importance in understanding the nature of civil society, its institutions and values, and how it functions as a measure of national resilience, for example, in the context of earthquakes. The “city”, more particularly Almaty and to a lesser (but growing) extent Astana, fills the external lens to the exclusion of the extensive rural hinterlands that surround it. Secondly, we challenge the assumption that civil society is largely a measure of the free expression of an active citizenry in a democratic liberal society *à la* Putnam. There may well be valid arguments to substantiate such claims in the industrial democracies of Europe and North America but this presupposes that cultural norms are interchangeable between societies without due regard to historical specificities and the environmental realities of time and space. We propose instead that in those geographical regions most exposed to personal misfortune and community danger, there was a pressing need for precisely such collective forms of action and for the formation of associations and networks committed to increasing the chances of individual and family survival. Evidence from hazard-prone regions, where communities have also been faced with repeated and prolonged hardship, supports just such a contention (Bankoff 2007).

Methodology

The principal research for this study was undertaken in South Kazakhstan oblast which forms part of the most seismically active southern and south-eastern region of the country (WHO 2012, 6). The oblast is also the most densely populated region in Kazakhstan, with a population per square kilometre more than two and a half times higher than Almaty oblast, the second most densely populated region (MFA 2018).⁷ It is also one of the poorest regions in terms of the Human Development Index, a composite statistic of life expectancy, education, and income per capita (Whiteshield Partners 2016). Six rural, hazard-prone communities, two from each of three rayons or districts were selected in consultation with our research partners at the Red Crescent Society in South Kazakhstan and the regional government (akimat): Atbulak and Turbat in the Kazygurt rayon; Burguluk and Tonkeris in the Tolebi rayon; and Kelte Mashat and Mashat in the Tulkibas rayon. The aim, where possible, was to capture a range of village communities in terms of their age, ethnic composition, livelihood activities, income levels, and exposure to environmental hazards including floods and landslides. All of the communities were susceptible to earthquakes.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews were undertaken alongside a survey of community risk perceptions of over 300 households conducted during 2015 and 2016. The research was designed to gather baseline information about the households surveyed including information about the respondents, their livelihoods, and their perceptions of, and responses to, the risks they face and problems they encounter in their everyday lives. This included questions on local systems of support and reciprocity. Though we were primarily concerned with people's current attitudes towards earthquakes and associated secondary hazards such as landslides, we were also interested in how people's understandings of risk might have changed in recent decades, especially with the transition from the Soviet Union to independent nationhood. In this context, many of the older respondents spoke about risk in relation to their life histories and that of their communities.

The FGDs were arranged to better gauge differences according to age, gender and social status, factors that we know to be important in rural Kazakhstan (Werner 2000). In all three districts, separate discussions were held with village elders (all male), women, and young people (under 30 of both sexes). In all, 14 FGDs were held in three chosen communities, at least three from each of the selected rayons: Kelte Mashat, Tonkeris and Turbat. Given the peculiarly elongated geographical nature of Tonkeris village running along the banks of the river and its effective (though not administrative) division into two separate communities, Tonkeris proper and Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, additional FGDs were held with the elders and women of the latter. Unfortunately, due to circumstances, it was not possible to organise a youth group discussion in this community. In Turbat, too, given the sizeable Uzbek population and its location on a site apart from the main village, separate FGDs were held with both Kazak and Uzbek participants. All women's groups were assisted by a female facilitator without any men present to enable more uninhibited discussions. Due to their age under 30 (but over 18) years old, young people were naturally unable to compare the pre-1991 situation to post 1991 and so did not materially contribute to this part of the study. They did, however, share their views on, and understandings of, civil society in the present day. The size of FGD's varied considerably from five to over 15 participants, with greater

participation among women and youth. In addition to the FGDs, three interviews with individual residents holding recognised positions of influence in the community were conducted in Tonkeris and Turbat. As it was not possible to arrange separate interviews with any residents in Kelte Mashat, two FGDs were organised with the village elders. All interviews and focus groups were conducted with the aid of interpreters in the Kazakh language and, where appropriate, in Uzbek or Russian. With the consent of all participants, discussions were recorded and then the digital recordings transcribed and translated into English for coding and analysis.

The foundations of nomadic communitarianism

Evidence that environmental factors lie at the core of civic engagement among the peoples inhabiting modern-day Kazakhstan is to be found in the historical evolution of societies there. Kazakhs were overwhelmingly a nomadic people until the collectivisation of agriculture and their enforced sedentarization by Soviet authorities in the early 1930s (Olcott 1981). Though pre-Soviet culture is defined by a nomadic lifestyle that precludes all reference to civil society, this does not mean that civic engagement was not an important aspect of traditional cultures. Indeed, it was an integral part of the customs and values that facilitated inter- and intra-group relations that made survival on the Central Asian Steppe possible. Life revolved around livestock, land and kin, while society was organised around the *aul*, a shifting settlement of felt tents belonging to an extended family that traced its lineage back agnatically to a *bir ata balası* or common ancestor, whether real or fictive (Martin 2001, 22). More important than any state, whose fluid boundaries expanded and receded with the centuries, was the enduring nature of clan affiliation. As a nomadic, pastoral society with diffuse authority patterns and a segmentary social structure, genealogical knowledge was privileged, and group and individual identity was mainly expressed by clan affiliation that was regionally based (Schatz 2004; Collins 2006). Organised into three tribal federations or hordes, Elder, Middle and Younger, clan designation together with its loose territorial affiliation was important in governing social relations between groups and regulating nomadic land-use from at least the late sixteenth century.

Life on the Steppe was harsh and unforgiving and survival necessitated a culture of reciprocity and mutual aid between *aul* members and within clan groups. Population “centres” were also small, usually less than 15 families, and scattered across a vast expanse of grass. Traditional forms of assistance (*zhärдем*) in this environment were formalised into recognised codes of practice that differentiated between the specific forms of aid given: *zhurtshiliq* for the relieving of debt, *zhilu* in the case of natural hazards, *qizilköteru* in the event of loss of sheep, *saun* providing cattle for milk to those in need, and *tasımal* helping the poor during times of migration (Martin 2001, 22). Failure to render such assistance, left a person open to community censure or *uiat*. *Uiat* not only denoted the shame incurred through the failure to fulfil communal duties but also implied improper behaviour (personal communication 20/07/2017).⁸ Islamisation only served to reinforce such notions of group solidarity and allegiance (*açabiyya*) based on family and personal relations (Roy 1996, 6-7).

Group solidarity, in turn, imposed a culture of reciprocity that enforced the redistribution of goods and prevented poorer members of the *aul* or clan from falling to one side in times of distress. This form of nomadic communitarianism defined wealth as not only held collectively by families but as also invested in the larger collective. In fact, “the larger a clan’s herd”, according to Victoria Martin, “the more that clan was expected to participate in redistribution measures, especially during times of natural disaster” (Martin 2001, 24).

Conflict resolution was also central to this nomadic communitarianism in which the precepts of *adat* or commonly-accepted obligations, responsibilities and sanctions were upheld in governing the behaviour and interaction of individuals within the community and its kinship structures. Rather than a code of law to determine the guilt or innocence of certain parties, *adat* was more a set of guiding principles that sought to balance maintaining community harmony and consensus with upholding the interests and rights of the individual. To decide on such grave matters not only required a person deeply versed in local custom and practice but also someone who was greatly respected and held in high esteem for their moral and religious character (Brusina 2005, 229). In practice, it seems that persons of this distinction were only to be found among the male elders of a community.

For matters involving mediation within the extended family, disputants turned to a lineage elder acceptable to both parties known as an *aqsaqal* (*aksakal*) for resolution of their differences. The *aqsaqal* listened to both parties in a dispute and reached a judgement based both on the merits of the individual case and on the interests of the family as a whole. For more serious matters or for arbitration between *auls* and kinship groups, the disputing parties turned to a clan leader or a group of clan leaders known as *biys*. All judgements, however, were not enforceable per se and the matter was only resolved to the extent that it suited the interests of both parties. As the voice of the collective, the *biy*’s principal aim was to determine the matter to the satisfaction of the community and the kinship group as a whole through non-legal means of retribution, compensation and persuasion. Judgements were made publicly in the presence of witnesses and were not written down or otherwise recorded. The degree to which such decisions were enforced in practice largely depended on the personal authority of the presiding *biy* and the standing of his clan (Martin 2001, 25-30).

During the eighteenth century, Kazakh clans came increasingly under the influence of an expanding Russian state beginning with the formal submission of the western khans to Catherine II in 1734. Over the succeeding decades, the Imperial government embarked on a policy of territorial aggrandizement and the large-scale transportation of farming communities and villages from Russia to Central Asia. This policy of resettlement resulted in the forcible expropriation of indigenous pastures and severe disruption to centuries-old seasonal migration routes (Wight 2015, 102-128). After a century of intermittent insurrections and punitive expeditions, the czars embarked on a strategy of incorporating the Steppe’s inhabitants into a *grazhdanskoe obshchestvo* or imperial “civil society”. A series of regulations and statutes first began to codify customary practice (1822 Regulations on Siberian Kirgiz), then to standardise it (1868 Provisional Statute on Administration), before finally to restrict its application and subject people to Russian law and more direct forms of rule (1891 Statute on Administration) (Brusina 2005, 236-240). While the judicial authority

of the *biy* was formally acknowledged in these reforms, his ability to practice *adat* freely was progressively restricted to minor matters of civil and criminal law, leaving him with “little authority as a judge in his own right” (Martin 2001, 112). However, even as the *biys* lost much of their authority in judicial matters, as increasingly younger litigants appealed directly to the Russian legal system for resolution of their disputes, they acquired new roles as political brokers and intermediaries between clan and state. Within the community, though, there was still considerable scope for the more traditional role of the *aqsaqal* who was called upon to settle many inter-family matters. The result was the creation of a parallel system of civic authority within Kazakh communities, a visible state-sanctioned structure and an “invisible” customary one. This dualism remains a characteristic of contemporary village society even today, with political, judicial and moral authority shared between state and non-state figures of authority (Martin 2001, 112).

The nomadic norms that upheld collective responsibility for community welfare and that prioritised group interests over those of the individual are credited with defining the “patterns of personal behaviour, communal interaction, and the perception of authority” in traditional Kazakh culture (Nezhina and Ibrayeva 2013, 338). They also suggest a social fabric with a high degree of civic engagement, at least at the local level, and with shared communitarian values borne out of the socio-environmental drivers of survival on the Steppe. But such shared norms also had their limits: the uncoordinated and sporadic nature of the revolts across Central Asia in 1916, provoked by the decision to conscript Kazakhs into military service, only highlighted the ethnic and geographical limitations of nomadic communitarianism and the lack of anything approximating a “national” civil society at the beginning of the twentieth century (Sokol 1954).

“Civil socialism”

Yet within a few decades of the Russian Revolution of 1917, a new set of leaders had laid the foundations of a socialist civil society or a form of “civil socialism” that comprised not only all the clans inhabiting the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic founded in 1936 but also the entire population of a pan-Eurasian, multi-ethnic super state, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Once again, this civil socialism, like nomadic communitarianism, does not accord to a liberal-market model based on the voluntary association of an engaged citizenry. Instead, it was one where an all-embracing party-state specified the activities of every political organisation, social movement and civic group and where even volunteerism was officially prescribed. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union created an immense social fabric over the ensuing decades that penetrated every aspect of society through a network of state-sponsored civil society organisations connected to the Communist Party. Many of these organisations required “volunteerism”, while membership in others was purely optional (Nezhina and Ibrayeva 2013, 338). Known as people or mass organisations, they covered all age groups and all aspects of life from school (the Pioneers, a Scout-like organisation for adolescents and the Komsomol, the youth wing of the Party), to work (trade unions, public associations, and the armed forces), to retirement (veterans and pensioners), and even leisure-time activities

(women's groups, reading circles, atheists clubs and party-linked sport organisations) (Shahrani 1993, 130; ADB 2015).

The subsequent distortions that this Soviet model wrought on the structures and functions of society resulted in what Andrey Kazantsev has termed an “uncivil society” (Kazantsev 2015, 28). All voluntary societies fell under the provisions of the 1930 Regulations for Voluntary Societies and Unions and were required to meet the state-directed social requirements current at the time in eliminating illiteracy, reinforcing the defence capacity of the state, or improving the general health of the population. These societies necessarily reflected the accepted norms and values of a socialist society and state (Diachenko 2007, 46). In mainly urban areas, a few large “public” organisations such as the Red Cross/Red Crescent Society, the Nature Protection Society, the Peace Fund and the Children's Fund were also permitted to operate, financed jointly out of the state budget and through membership fees (Kabdiyeva and Dixon 2014, 31-32). In rural areas, the *kolkhoz* or collective farm functioned as much as a social network as it did as an economic and administrative unit. These collectives were envisaged as a temporary stage in the transition to the ideal of socialist farming, the state farm or *sovkhoz*. *Kolkhozy* were created by combining small farms into a cooperative structure, in which the former owners and their families constituted most of the workforce, and where labour was remunerated through the distribution of farm earnings (in cash and in kind). *Sovkhozy*, on the other hand, were much larger and comprised lands confiscated from large estates owners (so-called “state reserve land”), their workforce recruited from among the rural landless, and whose employees were paid wages. Though these kinds of farms began to be created as early as the 1920s as an ideological example of “socialist agriculture of the highest order”, in practice many farms never progressed beyond the cooperative *kolkhoz* stage. However, even in the *kolkhoz*, there existed an all-encompassing hierarchy that extended from the highest to the very lowest positions on the farm. On these collectives, the administrators were in charge of agricultural and pastoral production and a parallel structure of Communist Party officials decided policy and upheld socialist morals. More than any other Soviet institutions, the *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* were attempts to transform rural society by overseeing all aspects of daily life including family relations (Humphrey 1983).

Nor in the early decades was life any easier in Soviet Kazakhstan though not all hardships were of natural origin. As in other parts of Central Asia, social relations in rural areas were subject to intense scrutiny by Soviet authorities not least because nomadism was regarded as a dangerous feudal hangover and inherently antithetical to state control. Soviet authorities moved ruthlessly to ban customary practices and criminalise clan identity, abolishing customary law and all its institutions in 1927. All official recognition of the *biys*' judicial powers was withdrawn and most of their names, incidentally, added to the list of *kulaki* and other class enemies based on their relative wealth, influential positions in society, and their non-progressive beliefs (Beyer 2006, 162). Yet, as Edwards Schatz has shown, the state mainly failed in its attempt to suppress traditional forms of identity and clan affiliation continued under the guise of local *kolkhoz* membership (Schatz 2004, 43-45, 58-59). As the collective also functioned as a cohesive social unit to distribute economic and political benefits, it often operated in a way as to shield its members from the most rigorous efforts of

the state to transform rural society. In fact, a parallel social system that continued to draw on traditional notions of reciprocity and dispute resolution persisted under the Soviets just as it had in the days of the czars. Fortunately, there are still those alive in the village whose memories stretch back to this period and who are able to describe the manner in which this parallel stratum of *kolkhoz* life operated.

Based on a series of FGDs and interviews with mainly community elders in South Kazakhstan oblast, we were able to explore this “invisible” side of village life and power relations during the Soviet period – a world that is rapidly slipping away as many of our most valuable informants were in their eighties. All of these, too, were male as women were traditionally excluded from holding positions as elders (*kariya*). Some of these informants were able to remember their childhoods in the 1930s and during the war years but most talked about the 1950s and the long reign of Dinmukhamed Konayev as First Secretary of the Kazak Communist Party – though no one referred to him by name. Our focus was very much on what went on at the local level, how disputes were resolved, the attitudes of local party officials and administrators to traditional structures and norms, and the way in which non-farm labour was organised. Understanding this, we argue, is key to understanding present day governance arrangements at the local (community) level.

Our informants stressed how farm managers and Communist Party officials had to reach a form of accommodation with customary practice and traditional social structures though the precise nature of this relationship varied according to time and circumstances. In some villages, the role of the *biys* persisted well into the 1940s and even the 1950s though such personages had long been divested of any former family or personal wealth. In one village, for instance, close to the Uzbek frontier to the southeast of Shymkent, village elders recalled how the allocation of water resources to the *ogorod* or “garden” plot (often quite an extensive area of up to four hectares for a household’s private use) was still managed by *biys* during this period (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016; Interview with Village Elder 2, Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, 2 July 2016). *Kolkhoz* members, too, preferred to settle disputes between members of the collective by approaching a respected member of the community to adjudicate the matter. As in the former court of *biys*, this elder alternatively listened first to one party and then to the other before asking both what needed to be done in order “to come to a peaceful decision” i.e. one that was in the interests of the greater community (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016). While Communist Party officials were evidently uneasy about the continuing authority of such figures in the village, they could do little about it and, in fact, often depended upon their cooperation. As one village elder remarked: “They had their books with laws, which they read out. It is the law of the Soviet power and who are you? According to the laws, we should lead here” (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016). In practice, however, it was not always possible to fully enforce such dictates.

In fact, it seems that the two power structures, formal and informal, often reached a *modus vivendi* with the *biys* helping Communist Party officials in some matters and the latter turning a blind eye to their activities in other spheres until at least the 1950s. Respected village elders were apparently often invited to Communist Party meetings where “members asked for their advice and opinion” (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016). Their advice

was also eagerly sought over more sensitive matters to do with the family, tradition or religion. For instance, polygamous marriages were one such case in point, permitted under Islamic law but not recognized by the Soviet Civil Code (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016). With the passing of time, however, a generational divide emerged between younger and older members of the collective. Older villagers still favoured more traditional forms of arbitration, while younger people were increasingly inclined to take matters directly to a Communist Party official, especially if they were dissatisfied with a judgement rendered by an elder. In the last decades of the Soviet era, the role of *biy* seems to have lapsed altogether and was only subsequently reinstated after 1991 (Interview with Village Elder 2, Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, 2 July 2016).

In the early years of collectivisation, informants often commented on how the times were very hard. “I don’t wish anybody the life we had in earlier times”, said one elder (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016). Particularly between 1930 and 1933, the unrealistic requisition targets of grain set by Stalin caused a widespread famine that left many Kazakhs destitute and short of food.⁹ Another village elder recollected how the authorities at the time had “killed” all the horses they were not able to requisition and feed. Villagers were left hungry as they were dependent on these animals not only for work, transport and leisure but also for “milk, kumis and meat”. Interestingly, the same informant was still able to name the chief architect of this policy, Stalin’s chosen henchman, Kazakhstan’s notorious Communist Party leader, Philip Isaevich Goloshchekin (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016). Indeed, some apologists refer to this famine as the “Goloshchekin’s genocide” and blame its excesses on the ruthless way in which the policy was implemented rather than on the policy itself (Cameron 2016).

There was no farm machinery on the collectives in these early years and all agricultural work was done by manual labour with whatever animals were available. Labour, too, became short during the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) when all able-bodied men were called up for military service. Only schoolchildren, single women and old men were left to work the land, and even many married women, raising small children on their own, were unable to tend their household plots. Elders had to resort to traditional forms of reciprocal labour exchange known as *asar* to ensure that these garden plots were cultivated and youngsters were sent on a rotational basis to households in need of labour. As men were demobilised after 1945, however, the need for this form of rotational labour gradually decreased only to be revived again in the 1960s when rising living standards encouraged villagers to build larger and more modern houses for their families (Interview with Village Elder 2, Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, 2 July 2016).

While the role of the *biy* seems to have lapsed in the later Soviet period, *aqsaqals* (literally white beards) or respected elders retained their influence in communities though it is possible that informants referred to the two terms interchangeably. As one ethnic Uzbek elder remarked, “there were no *biys* in the Soviet period [but] every village had one elder person called an *aqsaqal*. They tried to solve all the problems in the village.” (FGD with Village Elders (Uzbek), Turbat, 18 March 2016). Such statements suggest no clear delineation between the two roles in people’s memories. Yet it is clear that the *aqsaqal* continued to

exercise influence over various aspects of village life. They played a central role in organising *asar*, the rotational schedule of who helps whom, when. All forms of non-farm work, particularly the construction of private dwellings remained the responsibility of individual families but this was often a task beyond the resources of a single household. There was no labour to hire even if the money had been available. Some form of collective endeavour was needed and this was organised by villagers under the direction of an *aqsaqal*. “We organised *asar* ourselves. We invited our relatives, our brothers. One day they came to build the walls, another day they came to build the roof”, explained one informant (Interview with Village Elder 2, Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, 2 July 2016). Two to three months were required to complete a single dwelling, from making the adobe bricks, cutting the necessary wood, assembling the windows and door frames, to the actual construction of the walls and roof (Interview with Village Elder 1, Tonkeris, 2 July 2016; Interview with Village Elder 2, Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, 2 July 2016). While the family did much of the preparatory work, *asar* was needed during the construction phase and required coordination and direction to organise.

Asar (*ashar*) remained a common practice throughout the Soviet period all over Central Asia. A similar phenomenon was noted by researchers in a district of South Kyrgyzstan where it was used extensively during the Soviet period to bring together family and neighbours to help in the construction and maintenance of houses (Giffen et al 2005, 64). In South Kazakhstan, people would approach the *kolkhoz* manager to be released from their responsibilities on the farm for the time required to render it (FGD with Village Elders, Tonkeris, 7 July 2016). When asked if there was a difference between collective farm labour on the *kolkhoz* and reciprocal community work on a house, one elder villager replied: “In the collective farm, we work for the common good; *asar* is for someone’s individual good” (FGD with Village Elders, Tonkeris, 7 July 2016). *Kolkhoz* equipment, however, was never borrowed in the performance of this labour and only tools that were the household property of village families were used.

Communist Party members, too, if they were held in high respect by the community might be recognised as *aqsaqals*, further blurring the distinction between the formal and the informal power structures within the village. Membership of the Communist Party per se was not the important criterion in these cases but rather it was experience, wisdom and intelligence that mattered (FGD with Village Elders, Tonkeris, 7 July 2016). The manner in which these two systems, the traditional and the Soviet, coalesced is perfectly represented over the issue of gender roles. Respondents were adamant that there were “no women *biys* ever” but also pointed out that “in Soviet times there were women *akims*” or village headpersons (Interview with Village Elder 2, Tonkeris-Boldyrbek, 2 July 2016). While able to coexist, the parallel power structures never merged. If the outward forms and structures of village life were radically transformed by 70 years of incorporation into the Soviet Union, beneath the surface of the *kolkhoz*, villagers still related to one another, continued to resolve their personal disputes, and even settled many community matters in more traditional ways that preceded Russian influence whether Soviet or czarist.

The rural past matters

Our findings, informed by social origins theory, suggest that neatly characterising Kazakh history according to accepted socio-political periods places too much emphasis on change and the urban and too little on continuity and the rural. Understanding and appreciating this, we argue, is key to ensuring effective community engagement in designing and implementing programmes to increase community resilience in the present day.

Only a few per cent more Kazakhs today live in cities than they do in villages, and many traditional ways have persisted down the centuries in a modified form from the nomadic and the colonial through to the Soviet and the national. Yet the past is very far from being ignored in contemporary Central Asia. The past is seen to matter because it is appealed to by politicians as part of their nation-building project. Instead of the internationalism and fraternity that characterised the Soviet period, postsocialist leaders like to promote traditional cultural values and extol ethnic identity and history. In fact, most of these leaders were former Communist apparatchiks who, it could be argued, find in history a safe cloak with which to hide the hardships caused by the loss of welfare provisions and an opportune way in which to disguise their own political ambitions. In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov (1989-2016) hosted grand cultural extravaganzas to promote cultural identity at the national level creating what Laura Adam has termed a “spectacular state” (Adams 2010). In Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev (1990-2005) evoked the national epic, *Manas*, to revive *aqsaqal* courts as part of his wide-ranging reforms of the country’s administrative and legal systems while, at the same time, building up his own personal powerbase (Beyer 2006, 145-146). The past matters but it is seldom the rural past that is emphasised.

National governments in the region, however, are not alone in ignoring this rural past as external donors (multilateral bodies, bilateral agencies and international NGOs), preoccupied with rolling-back the post-Cold War state in the region, have also largely failed to understand the dynamics that underpin village life (Earle 2005, 246-248). In Kazakhstan, while the gradual re-emergence of a post-independence “type of Kazakh aristocracy” occupying positions of influence in politics and business is acknowledged, the existence of the traditional power structure in village society has largely gone unnoticed (Dissonova et al. 2002, 16). Yet, as this article has shown, informal local leaders and long-established community networks continued to be a feature of village life despite the dramatic political upheavals of the last few centuries. There are indications, too, that *asar* and other cultural forms are now the basis of a resurgent, rural Kazakh identity. As one elder explained: “This is our national tradition. Our fathers and grandfathers were using *asar* as well. When we couldn’t collect the hay or prepare the land for harvesting or build the house, we do *asar*. It hasn’t changed over time” (FGD with Village Elders (Kazakh), Turbat, 16 March 2016).

Similarly, many scholars have this same preoccupation with change, elites and urban areas, and largely overlook continuity, the everyday and rural village life. Accordingly, attention is paid to the level of civic participation during the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and credit given to the role played by urban public movements in the democratic transition post 1985.¹⁰ Conversely, the “mass organisations” of Soviet times are dismissed as just submissive organs

of the state and blamed for inculcating passivity, while the long tradition of civic engagement with its origins in the nomadic and Islamic past is passed over without comment (Makhumotova and Akhmetova 2011, 18; Knox and Janenova 2018, 309). What happened in the rural past is mainly ignored and village society deplored for its lack of civic engagement in contrast to the dynamism of the cities (ADB 2007; Nezhina and Ibrayeva 2013, 343). Yet, not only did an alternative or “second form” of civil society exist prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union but it continues to thrive in Kazakhstan as elsewhere in Central Asia today, rooted in “centuries of community organising, development traditions and mutual aid and localised forms of decision-making” (Babajanian et al. 2005, 212). The legacy of the Soviet Union also remains vital. As Marc Howard points out, socialisation is shaped as much by current institutional settings and values as by those of one’s parents, teachers and peers – “all of whom can contribute to reproducing the same patterns of attitudes and behaviour even if the original institutional environment is long gone” (Howard 2002, 166). As long as the majority of the Kazakh population grew up under Communist rule or were raised by people who have been, Soviet values will continue to be important in influencing the population’s worldview (Bankoff and Oven forthcoming 2020). What constitutes civil society today cannot be modelled by any neoliberal construct but requires more of a communal interpretation (Babajanian et al. 2005, 212). Unfortunately, scholarly neglect of any alternative model of civil society has real-life bearing on current policy: we found little evidence of much donor engagement with traditional rural networks and structures over a six-year period nor any real recognition of their potential importance in the event of a large-scale disaster such as an earthquake.

But there are also dangers inherent in correcting this neglect that may go some way to explain the lack of official recognition of rural traditions. While the rural past certainly matters, revealing the historical dimensions of civic engagement in Kirgiz culture, it also exposes the latent cleavages between ethnic communities.¹¹ The extent to which comparable forms of association exist among other national ethnicities in Kazakhstan, especially among non-Turkic communities, is a matter for further research. Interestingly, Russian participants (admittedly under 30 years old) in a focus group discussion of mixed ethnicity on a related research topic held in a provincial town close to Almaty were totally ignorant of *asar* as a term and were unaware of any equivalent practice within their own communities. At the same time, Kazakh participants in the same age cohort were familiar with the concept and fully endorsed the cultural norms it represented (FGD with Young People, Talgar, 5 April 2017). Ethnicity, in this instance, is simply reinforcing the urban-rural divide between the Russian minority who predominantly live in the country’s larger towns and cities and the Kazakh majority who predominantly live in rural areas.

Whether life was really “better” in Soviet times as one informant claimed, is probably a matter of individual experience, personal perception or nostalgia. Yet the past, more particularly the rural past does matter in Central Asia where it continues to forcefully shape the present. In their examination of the variations in civil society, Salamon and Sokolowski show how human behaviour is governed by complex interrelationships among social strata and social institutions that rest on “foundations inherited from the past” (Salamon and

Sokolowski 2017, 74). More than simply endorse, we would stress this point. In Kazakhstan, there are two rural pasts at work, a nomadic tradition of communitarianism and a Soviet heritage of socialist-inspired collectivism. While these pasts may have left fewer traces in urban centres, their influence is clearly manifest in the social structure and fabric of rural society. A continuing failure to recognise the significance of and engage with both the rural and the past may only allow more militant ideologies the opportunity to mobilise traditional structures for their own ends.

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¹ On the absence of a civil society in the Soviet Union, see Patricia Carley (1995) and Roger Kangas (1995).

² Needless to say, many scholars have disagreed with Putnam's conclusions. For an overview of such criticisms, see Stolle and Hooghe (2004).

³ An important exception to this oversight are the INTRAC reports on Central Asia. For Kazakhstan, see Giffen et al. (2005) and Zhumabekov (2005).

⁴ Established in 1925 as an autonomous republic of the Soviet Union within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, it became one of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic in 1936.

⁵ Perestroika was a movement for social, political and economic reform within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev during the 1980s.

⁶ According to the World Bank, 43% of Kazakhstan's total population was rural in 2017, compared to 56% in 1960. See: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS>.

⁷ The population density of South Kazakhstan oblast is 23.5 people per square kilometre compared to 8.5 people per square kilometre in Almaty oblast.

⁸ In contemporary urban Kazakh culture, *uiat* denotes the shame incurred by inappropriate public behaviour such as couples kissing in public places, not giving up your seat to an older person on public transport, or especially women acting/dressing immodestly. There is a very popular fictional character on the internet called *Uiatman* who shames girls and boys who behave in an inappropriate manner.

⁹ For a personal account of the hardships that ensued from the ruthless way in which the collectivisation policy was carried out, see Shayakhmetov (2006).

¹⁰ Glasnost was the policy or practice initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 of more open consultative government and wider dissemination of information.

¹¹ Kazakhs and Uzbeks were commonly referred to as Kirgiz during both the czarist and early Soviet periods.